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American, 1918-

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He studied at the Leonardo da Vinci Art School,  
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Bronze, 55 x 17 x 15"  
Lent by Vincent Melzac,  
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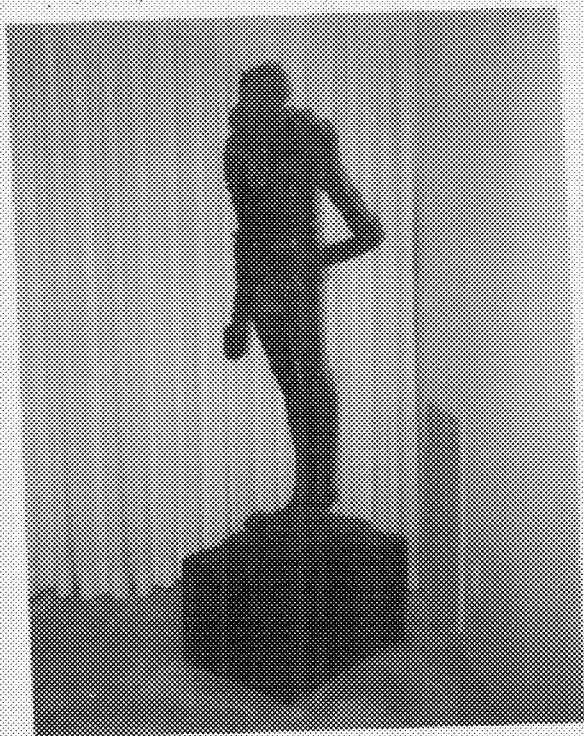


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By Frank O'Hara

## Introducing the sculpture of George Spaventa

Long considered by his fellow artists to be one of the major American sculptors, he now has a long-awaited first New York show



Spaventa, photograph by Don Cook.

George Spaventa has had a quiet, doubt-ridden, essential development. His work is special, in the best sense. His affinities are with the plastic qualities of Rodin, Medardo Rosso and Giacometti, and he has maintained them in a stubborn, personal way without any obvious influences from Constructivism, Cubism or mannerism à la Zadkine. Surrealism, too, seems almost totally absent from his work, although refrains of literary content are not, especially in relation to Kafka and Cervantes in his sense of caricature. Perhaps the only aspect of Surrealism he has bothered with is the much-neglected humorous one. There is none of Dada in him. One can only conclude that his influences are those of individuals rather than schools, of personalities rather than movements.

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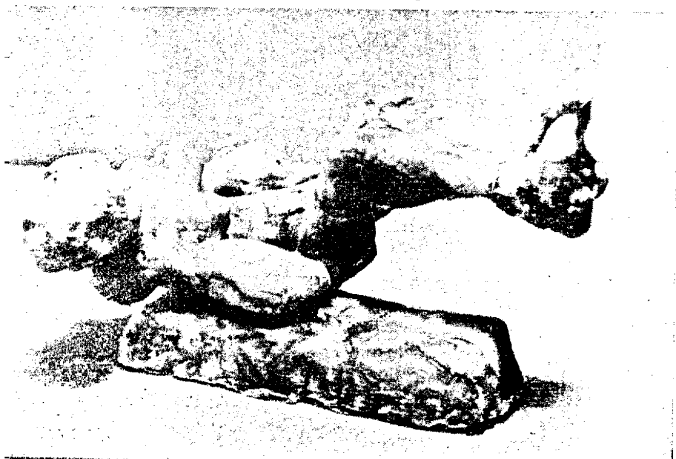
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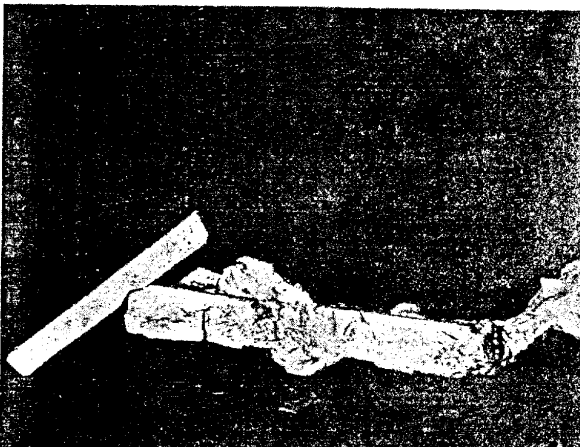
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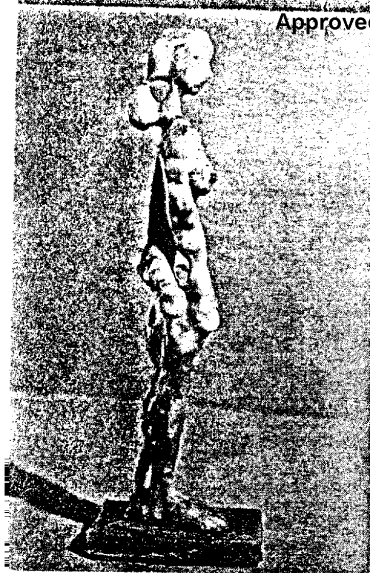
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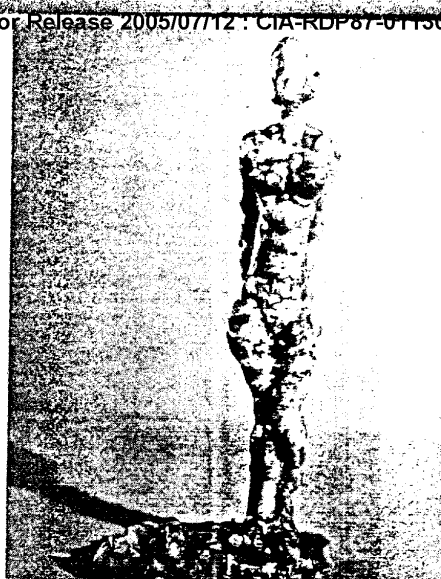
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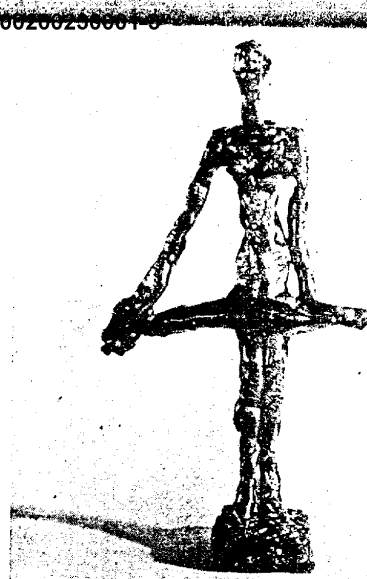


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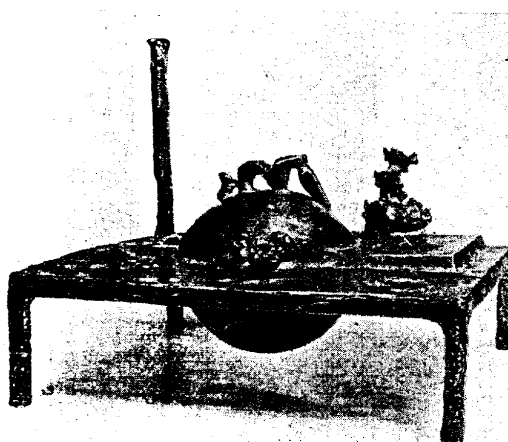
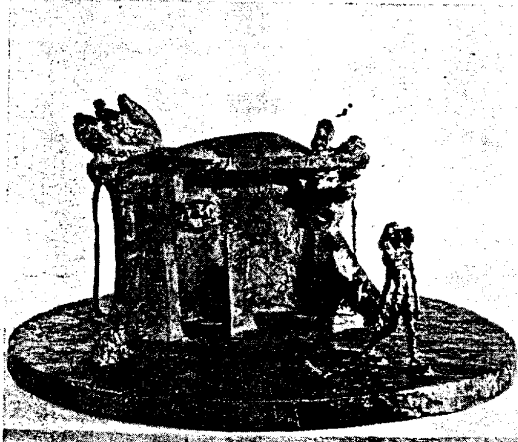
Spaventa's sculpture has been enriched by a totally serious and totally difficult search for unequivocal expression, and fortunately its resolutions retain the dilemma and the passion of this search, as if metaphysics were to be felt emotionally. Much of contemporary sculpture has dealt with the concept of sculptural motion brilliantly (one thinks of Boccioni, Calder, Tinguely), but for Spaventa the sculptural situation seems more to be a definition, a psychological stopping-point or arrest, sometimes tragic, sometimes rejuvenating, always formally essential to the still organism. In his equation, motion is the signal for the arbitrary, and he is devoted to its opposite.

That he should have this first New York one-man exhibition when he is in his mid-forties is not without recent historical precedents, most notably that of Willem de Kooning. For the last ten years his sculptures have emerged before the appreciative eyes of the most critical audience in the world: his fellow artists, chiefly the New York Abstract-Expressionists. What is apparent now in these works is

mastery, decisiveness and scope. The accumulation of years of self-examination and esthetic intransigence (Spaventa was born in 1918 and studied both in Paris and New York) has yielded a full, rich and spontaneous expression of a very particularized, very important spirit. The question of spirit is vital to an understanding of his originality and spontaneity. His is not the freshness of the spontaneous materials favored by the Assemblagists, but a freshness of the spirit which whispers to us, "Within . . ." and trails off into the atmosphere of greatness, glimpsed and captured. It is a tangible quality for all its allusiveness.

In the works of the '60s, he shows a new relaxation in following the dictates of his inspiration with no loss of grandeur, but rather a quickening of impetus. He fixes the precise moment of physicality with a mysterious, enlarging accuracy. Spaventa is one of those "happy few" whose work is absolutely essential to the art-life of America because it is close, intimate, ungeneralized, a witness of the most positive, and ambiguous, elements in our culture. His struggles are as meaningful as his successes because they are based on the highest of aspirations. As Blake said, "To Particularize is the Alone Distinction of Merit." Thus, George Spaventa brings a new conscience to American sculpture, a conscience as much concerned with what the artist is, as with what the human does.

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FRIDAY, JANUARY 11, 1980

# Jptown: Intimate Sculptures Grace Tribute to George Spaventa

By HILTON KRAMER

**T**HE hubbub of the holiday season tends to discourage art galleries from opening new exhibitions. The competition for money and attention is too great, and in the midst of so many cultural and social distractions — pleasant and otherwise — what is familiar in art easily triumphs over the unfamiliar. In the first weeks of January, therefore, it seems as if every gallery in town is mounting a new show. Here, then, is a critical sampling from current offerings.

When the American sculptor George Spaventa died in 1978 at the age of 60, he was all but unknown to the part of the art public that had come of age in the 1970's. His last solo exhibition had occurred in 1964, and even then his art had little in common with the new modes of sculpture — whether based on Pop Art or Minimalist abstraction — that were drawing public attention. The whole tenor of the art scene in the late 60's and 70's served only to increase an impression of isolation. He had become an artist who seemed to belong to another era.

In one important respect, however, Spaventa was lucky. He was much admired by other artists, especially the old 10th Street crowd that was an important force on the New York scene in the 50's, and it is they who kept Spaventa's reputation alive through the later years of his life.

Thus it is no surprise that in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition called "A Tribute to George Spaventa," which is on view at the Gruenebaum Gallery, 38 East 57th Street (through Feb. 2), the most eloquent words of praise are mainly those of other artists — among them, Willem de Kooning, Reuben Nakian, Esteban Vicente, Milton Resnick, William King and Sidney Geist — and some of the poets — Stanley Kunitz and the late Frank O'Hara — who were close to them.

There is little doubt, I think, about the quality in Spaventa's art that elicited this sympathetic response. Most certainly, it was the special intensity of feeling that the artist concentrated in his small sculptural objects. Mr. Geist speaks of Spaventa's "excruciating sensitivity," and this is indeed what still captures our attention in his work. Spaventa was not an artist much given to the idea of separating the man who suffers from the mind that creates, and he worked in a mode and on a scale that allowed him to sustain a high pitch of emotion in every form that his hands produced.

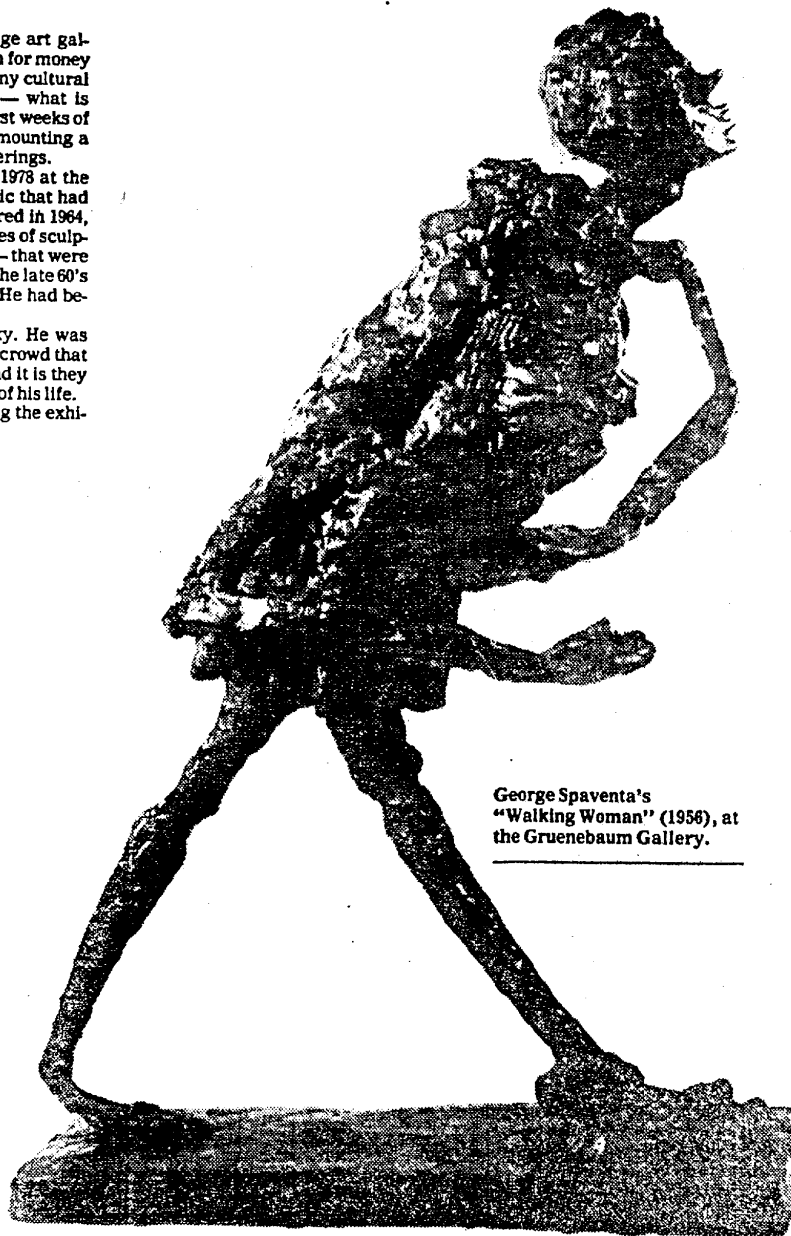
He was a modeler who worked in wax and clay on figurative themes, and the bronzes that resulted from this process still have the character of a very direct expression of feeling. Clearly, he took his cue in this sculptural enterprise from Alberto Giacometti, whom he came to know in Paris in the late 40's and who remained an important influence on his style. And as modeling is the most painterly of sculptural methods, it was from painting, too, that Spaventa drew his inspiration — especially the "Women" paintings of Mr. de Kooning. Interestingly, it now looks as if this particular debt has been fully reciprocated, for one of the many interests of the current show is the way it establishes Spaventa as a decisive influence on Mr. de Kooning's own recent sculpture.

To respond to Spaventa's art, one must be prepared for the intimacy of its scale. But this is also one of the strengths of Spaventa's work. It addresses each of us in the privacy of our feelings, and touches them in a way that a more "public" art never can. He was a wonderful artist, and this "Tribute" does him proper honor.

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## Intimate Sculptures Of George Spaventa

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George Spaventa's  
"Walking Woman" (1956), at  
the Gruenebaum Gallery.

Eric Pollitzer

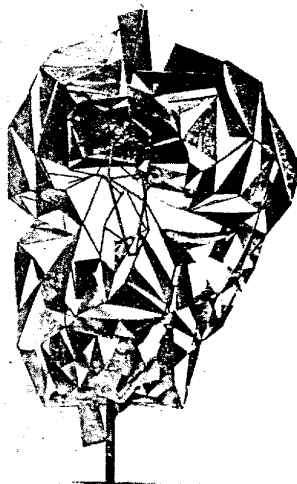




Radical concept of the figure in painting: E. de Kooning's *Conrad*.



Personal variation on conventional abstraction: Cherry's *Color Clusters*.



Personal variation on conventional abstraction: Martin Craig's *Face*, steel.

Radical concept of the figure sculpture: Spaventa's *Man*.



## Great expectations, part II

*New York's best group show, by and for the artists themselves, at the Stable Gallery, has run into trouble*

**M**any of the painters and sculptors whom all museums of modern art will want someday (sooner, one hopes, than later) to include in their formal exhibitions can be seen, along with a small army of their friends and relations, at the New York artists' annual, an exhibition which first was held, five years ago, in an empty Eighth Street store and since has found hospitality at the Stable Gallery [see A.N., Feb. '54 and May '55].

This year, for the first time, the affair looks a bit forced. The quantity of quality remains surprisingly high, but an air of good taste and conformity has been added, especially among the inferior works, which no longer are frankly, even brilliantly bad. On the contrary, most of them are obviously on the right track; they seem mediocre. Perhaps the moment of inspired collective activity that such an exhibition marks has passed, and the exhibition is undergoing the historical change of fossilization. More likely, its cumbersome system of selection by committee bogged down. Some sixty or more artists who have appeared regularly in this spontaneous manifestation of the longing to exhibit as a group are now absent. Because many of the missing artists work in styles distinctly independent from the abstract ones which, quite rightly, dominate the exhibition, one gets the impression that certain esthetic standards were brought to bear by the jury. This, of course, would mean that certain standards are acceptable; in which case the revolution is finished, the streets have been tidied, and all that is left to do is a bit of mopping up before the victory dinner. However, what appears to be doctrine well could be simply the result of a mild excess of confusion and malice, which, in normal amounts, are necessary stimulants to any such exhibition. Furthermore, the necessary restriction on sizes of exhibits unfortunately adds to the uniform look. Some way should be devised to permit showing the huge declarative pictures and sculptures that properly belong to such a living *Salon*.

Even given this apparent decline in vitality and variety, the artists' annual has enough pictures and sculptures to indicate the impressive amount of new, important works that are being produced in New York. Illustrated here are four of them: the figure pieces of Elaine de Kooning and Giorgio Spaventa, Martin Craig's abstraction of *Face* (his sculptures were recently seen in a "New Talent" show in the Museum of Modern Art's penthouse) and Herman Cherry's lush paste of colors that refer insistently to nothing beyond the confines of painting itself. The first two works are radical and abstract in their approach to art from the hypothesis of the figure. The latter two are more traditional in the avant-garde; they refine idioms and sensations. All four face the riddle of style squarely and avoid the tempting pretensions to an- [Continued on page 62]



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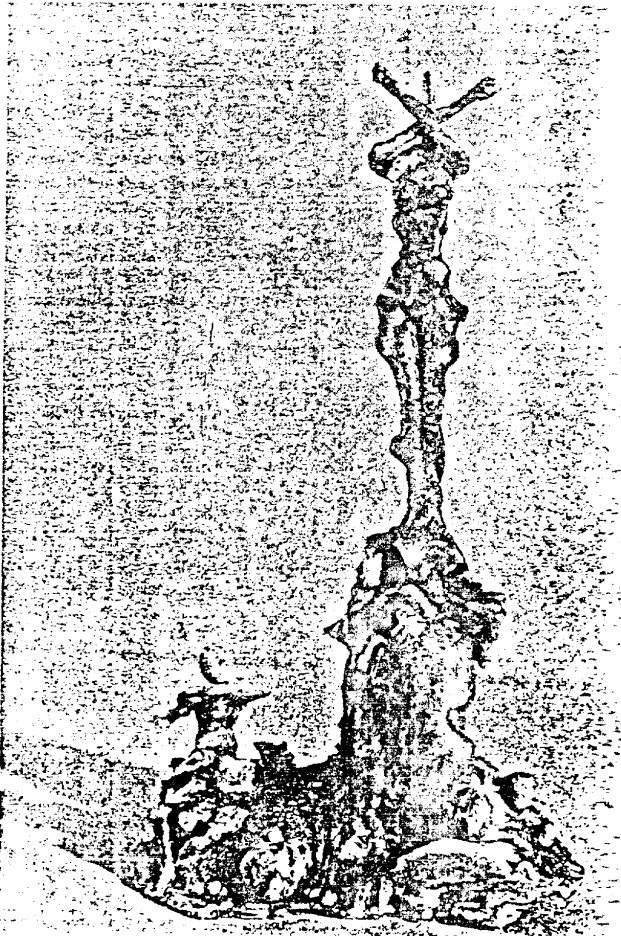
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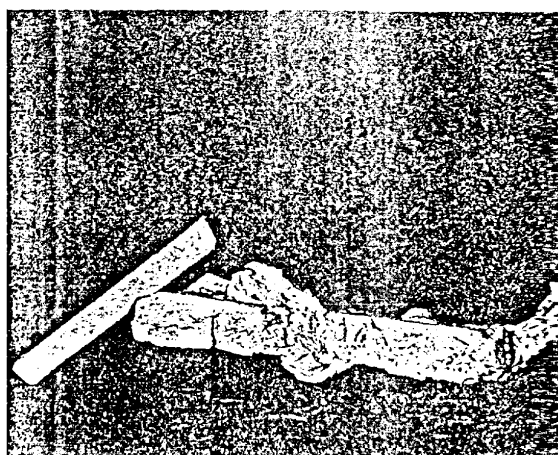
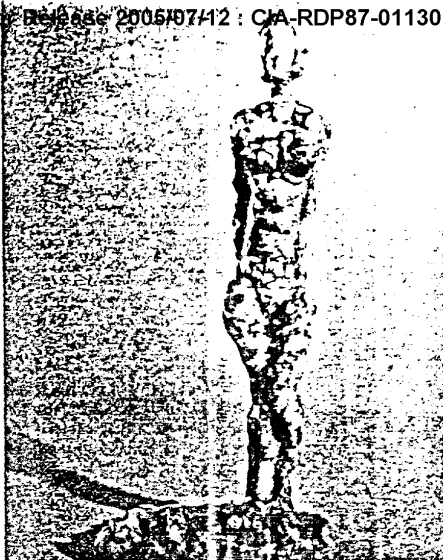






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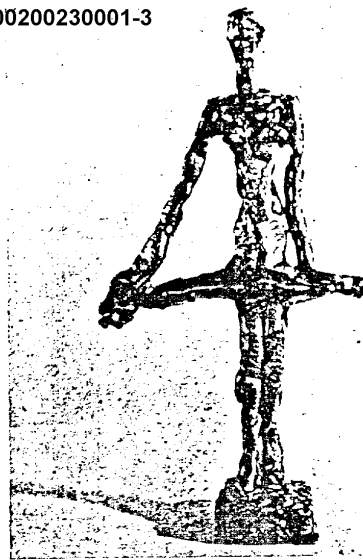


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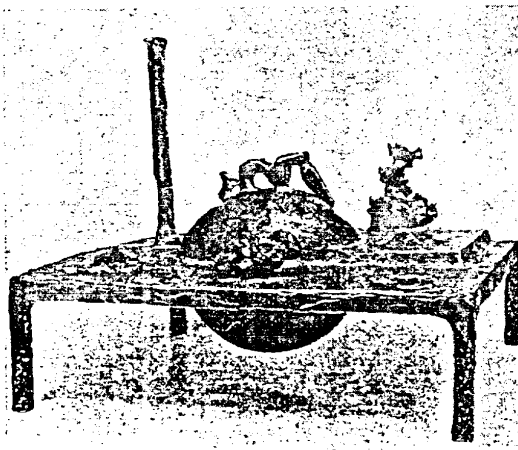
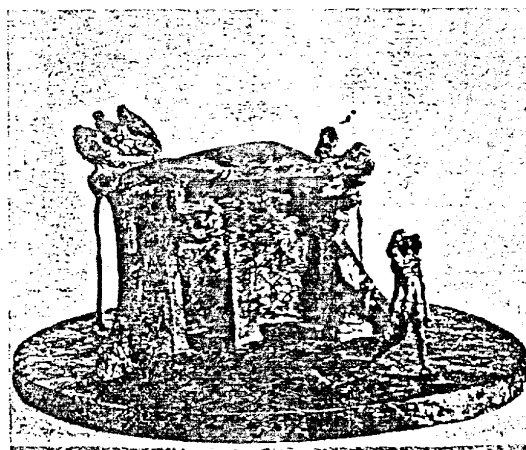
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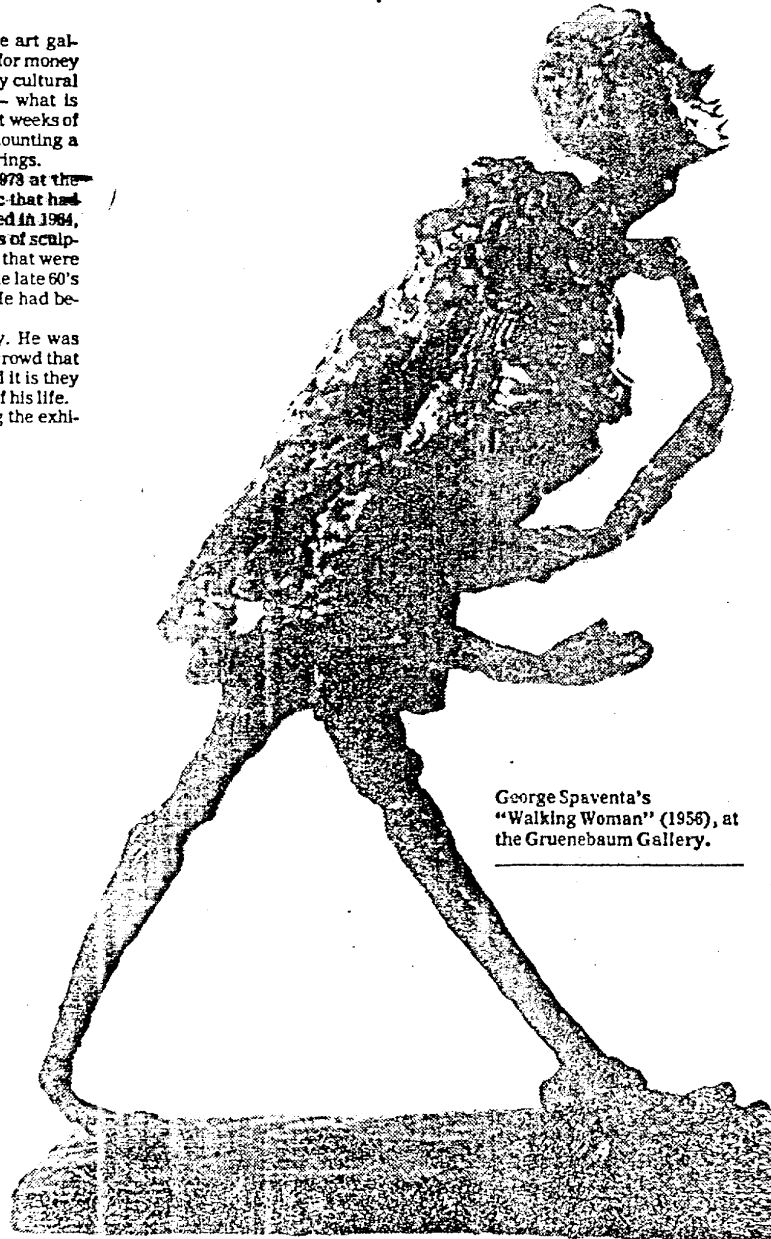
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George Spaventa's  
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Eric Polit

Gruenebaum Gallery

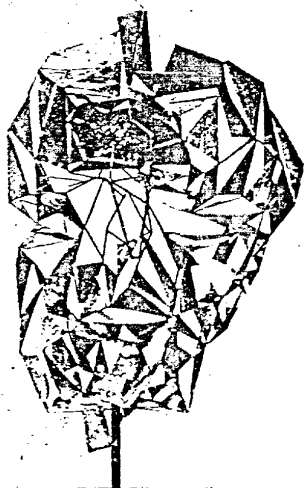




Radical concept of the figure in painting: E. de Kooning's *Conrad*.



Personal variation on conventional abstraction: Cherry's *Color Clusters*.



Personal variation on conventional abstraction: Martin Craig's *Face*, steel.

Radical concept of the figure in sculpture: Spaventa's *Man*.



## Great expectations, part II

*New York's best group show, by and for the artists themselves, at the Stable Gallery, has run into trouble*

Many of the painters and sculptors whom all museums of modern art will want someday (sooner, one hopes, than later) to include in their formal exhibitions can be seen, along with a small army of their friends and relations, at the New York artists' annual, an exhibition which first was held, five years ago, in an empty Eighth Street store and since has found hospitality at the Stable Gallery [see A.N., Feb. '54 and May '55].

This year, for the first time, the affair looks a bit forced. The quantity of quality remains surprisingly high, but an air of good taste and conformity has been added, especially among the inferior works, which no longer are frankly, even brilliantly bad. On the contrary, most of them are obviously on the right track; they seem mediocre. Perhaps the moment of inspired collective activity that such an exhibition marks has passed, and the exhibition is undergoing the historical change of fossilization. More likely, its cumbersome system of selection by committee bogged down. Some sixty or more artists who have appeared regularly in this spontaneous manifestation of the longing to exhibit as a group are now absent. Because many of the missing artists work in styles distinctly independent from the abstract ones which, quite rightly, dominate the exhibition, one gets the impression that certain esthetic standards were brought to bear by the jury. This, of course, would mean that certain standards are acceptable; in which case the revolution is finished, the streets have been tidied, and all that is left to do is a bit of mopping up before the victory dinner. However, what appears to be doctrine well could be simply the result of a mild excess of confusion and malice, which, in normal amounts, are necessary stimulants to any such exhibition. Furthermore, the necessary restriction on sizes of exhibits unfortunately adds to the uniform look. Some way should be devised to permit showing the huge declarative pictures and sculptures that properly belong to such a living *Salon*.

Even given this apparent decline in vitality and variety, the artists' annual has enough pictures and sculptures to indicate the impressive amount of new, important works that are being produced in New York. Illustrated here are four of them: the figure pieces of Elaine de Kooning and Giorgio Spaventa, Martin Craig's abstraction of *Face* (his sculptures were recently seen in a "New Talent" show in the Museum of Modern Art's penthouse) and Herman Cherry's lush paste of colors that refer insistently to nothing beyond the confines of painting itself. The first two works are radical and abstract in their approach to art from the hypothesis of the figure. The latter two are more traditional in the avant-garde; they refine idioms and sensations. All four face the riddle of style squarely and avoid the tempting pretensions to an- [Continued on page 62]

